

that this young state with its decisive trend toward the West will within the next thirty to forty years have taken possession of and populated the large tracts of land beyond the Rocky Mountains. It can further be foreseen that all along this coast of the Pacific Ocean, where nature has already formed the largest and safest harbors, very considerable commercial cities will gradually arise to handle a lively trade between China as well as East India and the United States. In such a case, it would be not only desirable but almost necessary for merchant vessels as well as warships to maintain a more rapid connection between the west and east coasts of North America than has hitherto been possible by the tedious, disagreeable, and expensive voyage around Cape Horn."

Even the greatest occurrences, which stirred the entire European world, were unable to force him to abandon his basic principles. After the defeat of Napoleon, he was asked to write a play to celebrate the German victory. First he refused, but then he consented after all and wrote *Des Epimenides Erwachen* (Epimenides' Awakening), based on a legend about the Greek sage Epimenides who had fallen into a sleep lasting many years. This short play reveals to us the horizon of Goethe the German and the cosmopolitan. Although pointing clearly to Napoleon, it expands the theme to that which is typical, that which is universal. The only actual person appearing in the play is Epimenides, who represents the poet's, Goethe's own view. All other characters are symbolic.

The story is briefly as follows: Epimenides is caused by the Muse to fall asleep. While he lies slumbering, the Demons of War, Cunning, and Oppression are rampant and destroy the existing order. Faith, Love, and Hope are temporarily driven out of the world by them. After the storm of destruction has passed, Faith and Love are raised up again by Hope, who is the first to recover:

Yea, the man who pays me homage
Is of happiness assured,
For what I am, that I am constantly,
Never do I surrender to despair;

Pain I assuage, supreme happiness complete,
Female of form, my courage is a man's;
Through me alone can life become alive,
Yea, for beyond the grave I can extend it.
And even when they gather me as ashes,
They cannot help but stammer out my name.

Faith and Love, filled with new strength, are greeted by Hope. The Demons having spent their strength, Epimenides awakes. With astonishment he regards the changes wrought in the world. Faith, Love, and choruses of country people announce to him what has happened, what deeds have been done, and what they still hope to do. Epimenides is ashamed of having slept so long:

Yet I feel shamed for restless hours,
With you to suffer was sublime.
For all the anguish that was yours
Has made you greater far than I.

This confession of Epimenides, i.e., of Goethe, contains a slight vein of irony; but he accords the highest recognition to what has been achieved. At the same time he draws the attention of the festive crowd to another virtue, the fourth:

One only, who with faithful hands
The sisters bound with tender bands,
Apart, and cloaked, she chastely stands,
'Tis Unity I must unveil.

The hymn ends in joy and delight, but without any gloating remarks about the defeated enemy nation. There is not a single word of hatred or even of anger against the vanquished foe.

We have contemporary testimonials to the fact that this play, in its very serenity and restraint, made—to quote from a letter—"a deep impression on the young warriors of the educated classes." Goethe the cosmopolitan aimed at the removal of separating obstacles, at a better understanding among the peoples; one can say that his goal was the forming of a spiritual unity among mankind giving free scope to the multiple interplay of all national contributions.

Goethe is indeed perhaps the finest example of a man who loved his own country and was also a great cosmopolitan. He is a proof that one does not exclude the other and that both gain by the combination.

*The candid opinion of the author of
"Flowers on Friday" (December 1944), one
of the leading younger writers of Japan.*

THE LITERARY TASTE OF PRESENT-DAY JAPAN

By TOMOJI ABE

WHILE I was lecturing at St. John's University in Shanghai on literature at large, I naturally had occasion to talk with the Chinese students, inside and outside the classroom, about modern Japa-

nese literature, and I always felt how difficult it is to be a sound judge of the contemporary literature of one's own country and then to be a good interpreter of it to foreigners who cannot read the original works. But those talks gave

me a few hints as to the nature of our literature; I somehow learned to look at it from outside. With the memories of those discussions in my mind, I now want to deal briefly with some of its aspects (although, of course, it is too big a task for a short article like this).

Japan being now at the climax of her war efforts, and literature being no exception, it is natural to begin with some reflections on the war literature. The bulk of works produced in the last few years deals with battles on land, on sea, and in the air, or with life on the home front. Among them are such famous novels as *Wheat and Soldiers* and *Mud and Soldiers* by A. Hino, and *Navy* by T. Iwata, but many will agree that Japan has not yet reaped the full harvest of war literature. At the present stage, most of these works are rather hastily put together pieces of reporting or correspondence, or propagandistic pieces directly aiming at promoting the war zeal of the people. Indeed, there are grounds for hope that in future we shall give birth to many a work which can stand a severe artistic test, if we consider that in past ages we produced such great sagas of war as *Heike-monogatari* or *Taiheiki*, which are very characteristic of our own mentality and have been cherished by us for hundreds of years.

TIMELESS FAVORITE

Anyway, it is too early to discuss our war literature now; and as for the nature of those pieces of correspondence or propaganda, I suppose you can imagine it fairly well without any detailed comments. But there is one thing to which I especially want to draw your attention. That is *Tanka*, sometimes called *Waka* or *Uta*. (By *Tanka* is meant "short song," by *Waka* "Japanese song," by *Uta* "song." Though there is some slight difference in the shade of feeling among these appellations, I shall use the word *Tanka* in this article.) It is a form of poetry consisting of 31 syllables. There is an even shorter one called *Haiku* or *Haikai*, of only 17 syllables. Both have been, and are, great favorites of us Japanese people. *Haiku* is of a comparatively recent origin, its tradition being about 300 years old, while *Tanka* is much more venerable, the first of the anthologies being compiled in the latter half of the eighth century; that is to say, we had this *Tanka* form as soon as we began to express our ideas or sentiments in poetry. Some even claim that it originated from the voices of the gods. It has never ceased to be the emblem of art and culture at the Imperial court; and everyone, high and low, loves to recite or compose it. It is utterly impossible to think of Japanese literature or culture as a whole without paying due regard to this form of poetry.

Although many *Tanka* poems have been translated into European languages, it is very hard for foreigners fully to understand and

appreciate their spirit and beauty, depending as they do so much upon the nuances and rhythm of the Japanese language. All I can do here is give a very rough idea. The *Tanka* represents a kind of lyric poetry, and in many points it can be compared to the Tang Dynasty lyrics of China. Love and the beauties of nature are the main source of inspiration. As was said by a tenth-century compiler of poems: "Without employing any force, this song can move heaven and earth, appeal to the hearts of the invisible gods and demons, make men and women love each other, make the spirit of fierce warriors tender; the song was born with the creation of heaven and earth." It is plain that *Tanka* has been considered to possess some mysterious virtue. But besides love and the beauty of nature, it has another great source of inspiration: the fire of patriotism. When the present war broke out, love for this traditional poetry naturally increased. Not only literary people but nearly all public speakers recite those patriotic songs of the past to inflame the spirit of the nation; while many soldiers take small volumes of *Tanka* to the battlefield with them. It would be no exaggeration to say that one in twenty soldiers likes to compose his own *Tanka*. Not a few foreigners may have heard Japanese soldiers or civilians singing in chorus a song "*Umi Yukaba*," the most beloved song at this time. It is the expression of the determination of a famous general and poet in the Manyo period to die gladly for the Emperor, set to music by a modern composer. After all, the poetic passion of the ancients has never weakened, and is burning now as strongly as ever. I am inclined to think that it is somewhat different in the case of old Chinese poetry.

SPIRIT RATHER THAN FORM

Tanka is extremely subjective in its nature, and there is reason to believe that this is the reason why we are so fond of it. When one is passionately in love, what use of deliberate reasoning? When one is in a melting mood with the charm of nature, what use of objective analysis? When one is going to give up one's life for the glory of the Emperor and country, what use of explanation? Only to utter a lyrical cry, in as simple a form as possible, and to die—that is enough, at least for the Japanese people. This is the spirit of *Tanka* which is burning at present, and I think it is necessary to pay attention to this spirit in order to understand the nature of Japanese literature, either ancient or modern.

But here I must stop a moment and ask myself if I am not putting too much stress upon *Tanka* in dealing with present-day literature. It might be so if I were approaching the problem from an external outlook, or if I had in mind *Tanka* as a form, because the most flourishing literary business in Japan now is

undoubtedly novel writing. Suppose *The XXth Century* were to invite some Japanese critic or journalist to write an article on modern Japanese literature, ten to one he would devote nearly all his pages to novels (and short stories) and novelists. However, I am trying here not to give a bird's-eye view but, if possible, to study the nature inherent in our literature today; I am intentionally devoting a great deal of space to *Tanka*, not as a form, but as a spirit. This *Tanka* spirit has infused itself into all other branches of literature and lives beneath the surface as a very strong element. I should even say that, not only in literature but also in art in general, we can perceive this lyrical element at work. Dr. Yashiro, an outstanding art critic, recently wrote a book called *The Nature of Japanese Fine Arts* and tells of the four characteristics of this nature, namely: "impressionistic," "decorative," "symbolical," and "sentimental." One would think those could be applied, to a great extent, to literature also. Lyrical impulse, thirst for beauty, work beneath all and aspire to something "intangible" in life and nature.

DO TASTES CHANGE?

It is certainly strange to see that this fundamental nature has never altered in modern times when one bears in mind that the life of the Japanese people has greatly changed with the introduction of Western civilization. Apparently it is a very difficult thing to change "taste." It is true that time after time writers or groups of writers have come forward to make literature more realistic or materialistic, more intellectual or scientific, trying to deal with life more logically or socialistically or psychologically. For instance, when S. Natsume (1867-1916), undoubtedly the greatest of the modern novelists, tried to do that kind of thing to a slight degree, critics and readers became rather uneasy and secretly worried whether he was not going to impair, with a little too much reasoning, the purity and beauty of life and nature. People like to let life and nature flow on rhythmically, without any artificial interference. When, a few decades ago, some other writers began to write socialistic novels, called "proletarian" or what not, many critics outwardly encouraged them more or less warmly; but it was very doubtful if their "taste" changed and whether inwardly they really admired these works. If you ask young men of Japan today whom they like best among living writers, I think many will say they cherish the stories of Y. Kawabata. Little girls, little flowers, little animals and birds, are his favorite subjects. He has hardly touched any social problems or affairs of the war. He is simply an artist. I suspect that it may be related to the tradition common in China and Japan of *literati* (文人). The ideal of that *literati* attitude may be living even now. A few days ago one of my students

in Tokyo wrote to me from a factory where he is working, waiting to be called to the front, and what he especially wanted to tell me was that he was recently lucky enough to have a chance of being introduced to that Mr. Kawabata, and that he was trembling with joyous anticipation in looking forward to what might be the greatest event of his life.

The taste of modern Chinese intellectuals is somewhat different in this point, if I am not mistaken. They seem to care more for matter-of-fact realities of life. Of course, it would be erroneous to say they lack a fine lyrical sensibility in their literary taste, for in the past they added so much to the treasure house of the world's lyrical poetry and produced such a beautiful novel as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*; and from what I have observed it is a fact that they still strongly admire the fine sentiments expressed in those works. In this respect, we two oriental peoples can be said to share the same tradition of taste to a great extent; but at the same time it must not be overlooked that the modern Chinese can never part from the more realistic view of life. It may be that they are more rational. They always like to stand firmly upon the ground, while we prefer to soar up into the sky. Maybe we are more romantic and idealistic. The other day I asked about twenty Chinese students to write their opinion of any European works they liked, and I found that three among them picked Ivan Turgenev. I am a stranger to Russian literature, but I think that, though Turgenev is quite lyrical, his ideas or situations or characters are far from vague, being very clear-cut and "tangible." It could not be three Turgenevs in the case of Japanese students, but possibly three Anton Chekhovs, I thought then. Afterwards, the package of the essays by the freshmen of my college in Tokyo arrived. They had answered to a similar request I made before leaving. Among sixty students, a little over forty wrote about Japanese works. In the remaining papers there were three Tolstoyes, three Carossas, two Chekhovs, one Hesse, one Rilke, and so on.

"PURITY"

If I have succeeded in explaining that this lyrical quality is really one of the important keys to understanding Japanese literature of the present day, it will not be meaningless to reflect a little more upon its nature. To our conception at least, it does not signify indulging in weak, peevish sentimentality when one loves this lyricism. *Tanka* has been the vehicle of expressing the fiery determination of fierce warriors as well as that of the lament of love-lorn court ladies or that of the contemplation of hermit priests. There must be some positive strength contained in this lyricism, although it is very hard to explain such a subtle matter. In this cult of genuine beauty may live the

spirit of a bold heroic idealism which has urged us always to aspire directly to the highest perfection and purity, sometimes at the cost of losing our foothold in the world of reality. We have not cared much about the beginning or the middle way; we have aimed at reaching the goal in one step. One of our most frequently used—or rather abused—literary terms is *junsui*, meaning “pure.” We are so fond of this word. Literature must be pure; that is the virtue above all. It may want in strength, richness, and resourcefulness sometimes, but it is all right as long as it is pure.

This trait of mind may be detected in the attitude and manner with which we have met Western literature in modern times. Nearly every student of literature wanted to aspire after the most gigantic mountains—Goethe, Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and so on, sometimes without consulting his own feet in his eagerness. Only the pinnacle, the ultimate state of perfection, took hold of his mind. I am sure the Chinese will do otherwise. They will never forget to enjoy themselves on the more comfortable plains and slopes. They like to enjoy as well as to study. This difference in attitude may have something to do with what foreigners often call the humorlessness of the Japanese compared with the Chinese. And I suspect a similar attitude can be perceived in our activities in other fields—in philosophy, fine arts, music, or even in politics or economic life, although it is, of course, beyond my faculty to treat with all those phases of our modern civilization.

At any rate, it would be impossible, without understanding such a trait of mind, to explain our enthusiasm for German idealistic philosophy; or modern French literature, which we have thought to be very “pure”; or Russian literature, which seemed to us to be profound to a superlative degree. We may not have fully digested the discipline of thinking of the Germans or the rationalism of the French or the powerful realism of the Russians, and that may be the reason why we have not yet developed any heavy industry in literature; but it would be rash to deny that we have grasped the spirit in them by our intuition long trained by tradition. It is unjust, I believe, to say that we are only imitators. Our relation with Chinese and Indian culture in the past teaches us otherwise. Anyway, we liked to face every supreme object with something of the spirit of those body-crashing pilots of the Pacific, and that is what I think is the spirit of our tradition, in literature as in life.

It seems to me, after all, that Japanese literature is quite peculiar or quaint in its nature. It is not an insignificant thing, but it is very difficult for foreigners to appreciate or understand it. To be a real lover of it, one must pass the narrow gate, like Lafcadio Hearn, who formed such an intimate relation with

Japanese life itself. In this respect I think Chinese literature has more of an international appeal, generally speaking.

PRESENT AND FUTURE

Of course, I am not going to say that we are superhumanly or inhumanly “pure.” It is indeed impossible to be a hundred-per-cent purist in literary taste. A vast demand exists among us for the more easy-going kind of literature, and year after year an enormous amount of so-called popular literature is produced to meet that demand. To study it will give a number of clues for the understanding of the mind of the ordinary Japanese people. But there is a very sharp distinction between the so-called “pure” literature and the popular one. At least the devotee of pure literature likes to keep the line of demarcation jealously. And besides the demand for popular entertainment, another kind of demand exists which cannot be fulfilled by “pure” literature. We are actually living in the complexity of modernized social life, and so many problems other than lyricism face and trouble us every day. Literature ought to grapple with them. Hence not a few works that have political or social bearing come forth year after year. Some years ago they were socialistic ones; now they are patriotic. But this kind of literature is also somewhat distinct from the traditional “pure” one, at least at the present stage. No synthesis has yet been reached, and we lack the heavy industry of literature.

And what about the future? No one can be a prophet, but I am of the opinion that this nature will not change so easily. Of course, it will suffer some change if Japanese society itself changes drastically. But that becomes a problem rather for the students of social science than for *literati* like me. For instance, when I have tried to talk of our literature by way of the tradition, they will point to some aspects of society such as the strong feudal element still surviving and give some efficient explanation about the nature of modern literature, and then they will proceed to say that literature will become such and such when society becomes such and such. But—perhaps because I am rather conservatively minded—I want to repeat that it is very difficult to change the taste of a nation ingrained in the course of long tradition. I so often hear people talking about the strong and weak points in the nature of an individual or a nation, but I doubt very much if they are really things to be thought of as divisible. My opinion is that the strong point is the weak point and the weak point is the strong point, being only the two appearances of intrinsically the same thing. When an individual or a nation is on the ascent, its very nature becomes all merits, and when declining the same thing becomes all defects. So will it be with the nature of Japanese literature.